

BEN OWEN.



BEN OWEN,

A Lancashire Story.

BY

JENNIE PERRETT.

"He that does good deeds here, waits at a table
Where angels are his fellow-servitors."



TORONTO :

WILLIAM BRIGGS,

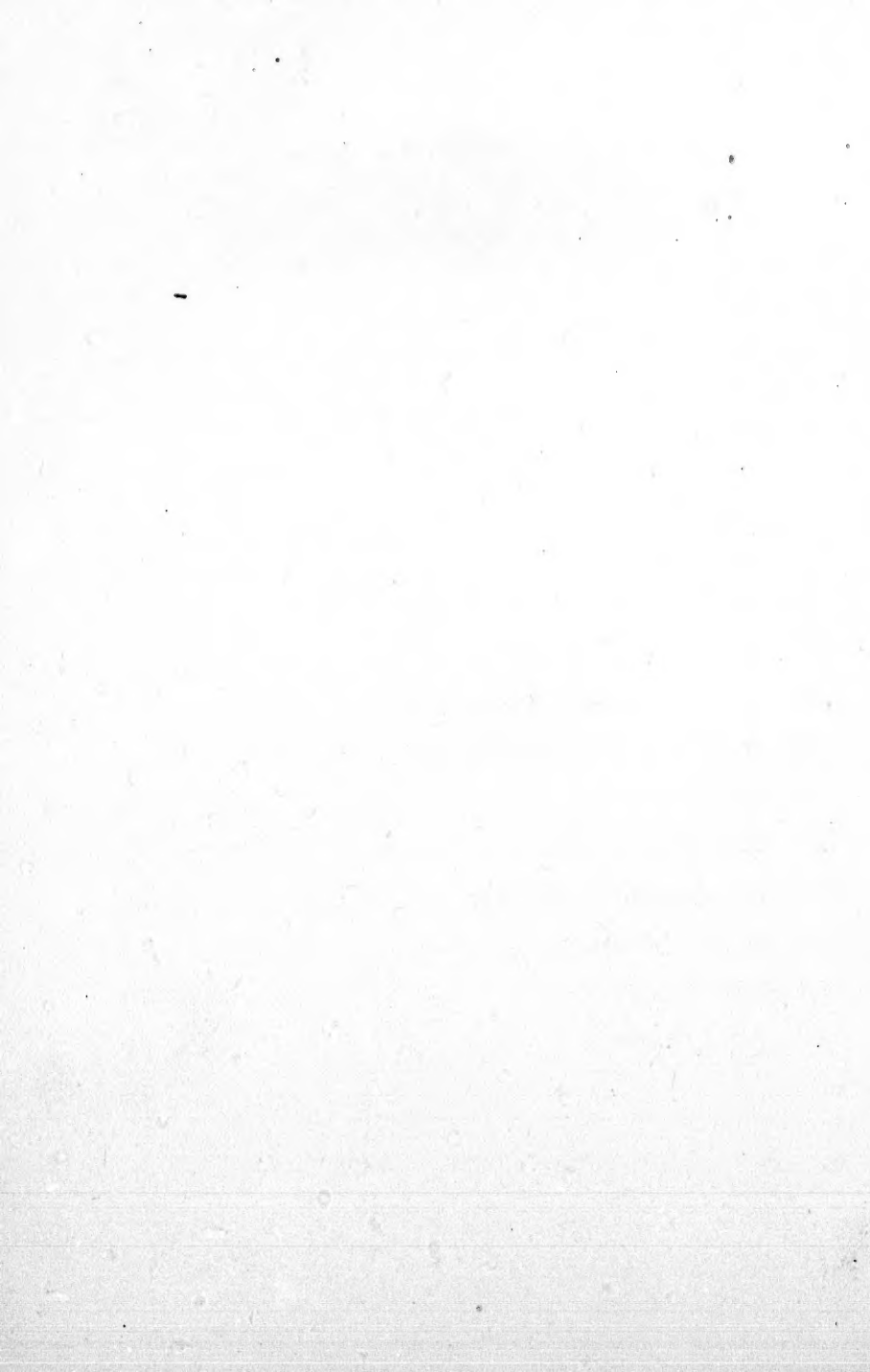
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BEN OWEN.

CHAPTER I.

KEPT IN.

THE heat had been intense all the day, for more than a week no rain had fallen; the grass in the fields, and along the roadside, was brown and scorched, the thirsty flowers in the gardens drooped upon their stems, only the tall sunflowers held their heads erect, and looked proudly up to the blue, cloudless sky.

The church clock of the village of Ashleigh had just struck four when a slight breeze arose, stirring gently the branches of the trees in the playground of the village school, and the birds that had been venture-some enough to build their nests there, peeped cautiously and expectantly around.

The breeze *might* mean that rain was coming, or it

might not ; anyhow it was a new topic for conversation ; there had been nothing but the heat to chatter about for some days past ; so the birds chirped and twittered away, and the most weatherwise amongst them watched a tiny, white, fleecy-looking cloud passing along the sky.

Some one else as well as the watchful little songsters saw the first signs of the coming shower. A tall, stalwart man, who had been walking through the dusty lanes, and now came slowly up the street where there was no shade or shelter from the sun's burning rays, looked up, and as he saw the cloud, a grim smile of satisfaction passed over his hard, stern face. And a little girl who stood at the open door of the school, watching a butterfly with bright, coloured wings, saw the same tiny cloud, but it was no longer alone, others larger and darker were spreading themselves rapidly over the sky.

The child left her post, and hastened across the room.

"What is it, Nancy?" asked the schoolmaster kindly ; "you may stand at the door a few minutes longer."

"Please, Mester Deane, it's comin'," said the child.

"What is coming, Nancy?"

"Please, sir, th' rain's comin'."

The schoolmaster went to the door, and looked up at the dark clouds.

"Yes, Nancy, you are right," he said, "we shall have a heavy shower, and then the air will be cooler."

Mr. Deane rejoiced at the thought, for he had found the intense heat very trying.

It had certainly affected the children's conduct; they had been restless, fidgety, inattentive, and sleepy the whole of the day. More than one little head had fallen weariedly upon the desk, the book or pen had dropped from the tired hand, and certain unmistakable sounds had borne witness to the fact that for a time at least sleep had conquered any desire for knowledge.

Mr. Deane had not attempted to awaken the sleepers, he put the cushion from his chair under a little girl's curly head, and he placed another wearied child in a small recess near his own desk.

More than once he thought of dismissing his scholars early in the afternoon, and giving them an additional hour's instruction another day.

But the schoolmaster was a quiet, methodical man; with him each hour of the day had its allotted amount of work, and he shrank nervously from any deviation from the existing school routine.

Therefore, instead of closing before the appointed time, he exerted himself to the utmost to make the afternoon lessons as pleasant as he possibly could, and exercised an unusual amount of patience on behalf of his scholars.

They were troublesome and unruly, these children; almost unconsciously they had taken up the idea that a schoolmaster was a tyrant whom they were bound to outwit, and cheat, and conquer if they possibly could.

Some of them would have rebelled openly had they dared, or if they could have gained anything by so doing, at being obliged to attend a school at all. They were not so entirely to blame for this, as any one unacquainted with the facts of the case might have supposed them to be.

For the children knew what Her Majesty's Inspector who visited Ashleigh at certain times did not know, how some of the parents grudged the few pence weekly for "th' school wage." And also how they grudged still more the precious hours which bore no fruit, so far as they in their shortsightedness could see. The children knew, too, how they were kept at home on the faintest pretext of an excuse to help with the work of the household.

Still, parents and children had sense enough to know that it was useless fighting against the laws of the country. The Government had taken all children from collieries, factories, and workshops of every description into its own hands, and was fully prepared to carry out all it had undertaken.

But, if the Ashleigh children could not unsettle the Government, they could, *and they did*, make one of its representatives, in the form of the schoolmaster, very uncomfortable at times.

The village was a few miles away from busy, noisy Manchester, and some of the oldest inhabitants of Ashleigh could remember the time when the houses on the high' road to the city were few and far between.

But the houses were very numerous now, and in the village itself whole rows of workmen's cottages had been built during the last few years for the accommodation of families who worked at the Ashleigh Calico-print Works.

To these Works, the calico woven in the cotton mills was brought, here it was bleached, and passed from the men working in the "dyehouse," "steaming" and "raising rooms," to the women and girls who did the "plaiting" and "folding," the "sewing" and the "marking."

When it left the warehouse placed in immense bales on large luries it was no longer plain calico, but print of all colours and various patterns.

Some of the bales went direct to the Manchester market, and from thence all over the United Kingdom; and some went to Liverpool, and from thence across the broad Atlantic, and away to far distant lands.

The Print Works found employment not only for men and women, but also for children.

At the age of ten they could enter as "half-timers," working one part of the day, and attending the school the other part. Working among men and women, many of whom had not "the fear of God before their eyes," seeing and hearing much that was wrong; was it any wonder that the children soon lost the innocence of childhood, and that their finer feelings were dulled and blunted?

Mr. Deane endeavoured to bear these facts in mind in all his dealings with his scholars. And on this hot summer afternoon, wearied as he felt, not one impatient word escaped his lips, and when he saw the gathering clouds he resolved to dismiss the children at once, so that they might reach their homes before the rain came. So he rang the bell, and gave the word of command, "All books closed."

At that very moment a little boy sitting on one of the back seats took a hard, green apple from his pocket, and deliberately threw it at a boy who was sitting on a form in front of him.

The apple went too far, it missed the boy, and hit the master instead.

Mr. Deane's pale face flushed; some of the children laughed, and looked round at one another, and then stared at the master, wondering what he would do.

They were not left to wonder long. Mr. Deane looked gravely at them, and said quickly, but firmly, "How many times have I forbidden you to throw anything across the schoolroom? Only a week ago one of the windows was broken by a ball, and the other day a little girl was hurt by an old knife thrown by a thoughtless boy; now, children, I ask you who has thrown this apple?"

All were silent for a few moments, then little Nancy's voice was heard.

"Please, Sir," she said, "yo' dunnot need to think as onybody throwed it *at yo'*, yon apple were na meant for yo'."

"I don't think it was, Nancy, it was intended to hit some one else, and I hope the boy or girl who threw it will at once tell me the truth. I would rather have a dozen apples thrown, and every window broken, than that one of you should tell me a lie!"

There was silence again, only broken by the ticking of the clock, and the patter of some raindrops on the stone step at the door; then came a dull, heavy sound like thunder in the distance.

A pale-faced lad about thirteen years of age started as he heard the sound; the master looked steadily at him, the boy *felt* rather than *saw* the look; his face flushed crimson, and his eyes sought the ground.

Naturally unsuspecting though he was, Mr. Deane felt certain that the lad had some knowledge of the point in question, and he was grieved at the thought; he liked the boy, and up to the present time had always found him truthful and obedient. He waited a little while, hoping that he would speak, then he said, "Ben Owen, did you throw that apple?"

The boy looked up then. "No, Sir," he replied.

But his eyes dropped again as soon as he had spoken, and the bright colour rushed to his face.

Mr. Deane was grieved and puzzled, and the children began to look impatiently towards the door.

"Ben Owen," asked the master, "can you tell me who did throw the apple?"

The boy raised his head, an earnest, beseeching look in his blue eyes.

"Did you hear my question?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Am I right in believing you know who threw that apple?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Who was it then?"

"Please, Sir, I canna tell yo'!"

"Very well, if you cannot, or rather you *will not*, tell me, you will be kept in after the others have left. Mind, children," added Mr. Deane, "I do not wish to encourage you to tell tales of one another, but I am determined that this dangerous practice of throwing things across the schoolroom shall be put an end to."

When the school was dismissed, a few boys lingered near the door, and Ben Owen went back to his own seat.

"Ben Owen," said the master, "I will leave you three sums to work while I am away, numbers ninety-one, ninety-two, and ninety-three; I will return presently. Run away home. boys," he added, as he locked the schoolroom door, and walked quickly away.

Ben Owen took from his desk his slate and book; as regarded his task he would rather have had a page of history or poetry to learn. He was not quick at figures, and the three sums given him meant for him an hour's hard work.

An hour's work! And his head ached and throbbed *now*; he had been up since five o'clock, in the Print Works by six, in the hot schoolroom all the afternoon;

he had behaved well himself, and had done his best in his quiet way to persuade the boys in his class to behave well too.

As he thought of this his mouth quivered, and he leaned his head upon his hands; there was no tormenting schoolfellow near to call him "a cry baby," the hot, burning tears fell fast now.

They fell upon his slate, rubbing out the figures he had just made. He pushed back his hair from his forehead; such beautiful hair it was, as fair and curly as that of any dainty drawing-room pet.

"I'm a brave soldier, I am," said Ben half aloud, as he commenced his sum again; "it is na such as me as will win th' prize. Th' Great Master did na stop to think about Himself when He were on earth, He had a world of trouble and died a shameful death for us, but we think we mun ha' no trouble, we're noan so ready to take up our cross and follow Him."

The rain was falling fast now, the wind had risen, the peals of thunder were long and loud, and the flashes of lightning bright and vivid.

The boy all alone in the large schoolroom looked up to the window nearest to him, and a bright smile passed over his face.

"It's a real storm an' no mistake," he said, "an' I'm glad now I've done as I have, poor little Jimmy is so feart of thunder, he would ha' shrieked if he'd been here alone, an' I'm noan feart mysen; it's all of God, whethar it be thunder, or hail and tempest, or th' still nall voice."

Ben applied himself with redoubled energy to his task.

Half an hour passed away ; the storm was at its height now, the rain falling in torrents.

"It does na' stop," said Ben ; "there's a mighty sight of water *outside*, I wish there were but a gill-pot full in here, I'm real dry, I am ; what with th' heat an' th' dust I feel pretty near choking."

On the floor, by Mr. Deane's seat, just where it had fallen, lay the apple, the innocent cause of all the trouble.

The boy's eyes brightened as they rested on it ; green and sour, and uninviting as it looked, it was only too tempting to the thirsty lad. He left his seat, and stooped to pick it up ; he held it for a moment in his hands, and then dropped it as suddenly as if it were a burning coal.

"It's like as if th' heat had turned my brain," he exclaimed, "Lord Jesus forgive me, I were na' thinking rightly what I were going to do, I conna *steal* !

"No, I conna, by th' Great Master's help I will na steal," he said, as the tempter whispered to him that the apple no longer belonged to any one, no one wanted it, it would never be thought of again.

"Yon apple's not mine, an' I will ha' nowt to do wi' it," exclaimed Ben.

And praying for grace to resist the temptation, thirsty and wearied though he was, he finished his task, and sat quietly waiting for the schoolmaster's

return. More than an hour had passed away before he heard the sound of the key in the lock, and saw Mr. Deane coming towards him. Ben rose from his seat, and gave the slate to the master.

"The answers are correct," said Mr. Deane, as he handed back the slate, and looked earnestly at the boy's face.

Very tired the pale face looked now, the features worn and thin, there were lines about the mouth that told their own story of the boy's powers of endurance being tried to the extreme point at times.

But there was no trace of sullenness there, no resentment.

"Ben," said Mr. Deane, "I must have been away an hour and a half, I never intended to stay so long, but after I reached my house and was waiting for a cup of tea (it does not sound very manly, Ben, and you need not tell any one), I almost fainted."

"Yo' did, Sir? Ay, but yo' are noan strong enough for such like work as yo' have here, we're a rough lot here; I reckon they are a deal smoother spoken, softer mannered sort o' folks, where yo' come from. I'm sorry, Sir, as I couldna' feel it reet to tell yo' what yo' axed me, but I knew him as had throwed yon apple would ha' had to be kept in, an' I could na' think of letting a little chap who's feart of his own shadder, bide here alone; yo' will forgive me, will yo' not, Sir?"

"I will, my lad," replied the master, as he turned his steps homeward again.



CHAPTER II.

BEN'S HOME.

THE cottage in which Ben lived stood alone, near the church.

To this cottage, sixteen years before, Ben's father, an industrious, steady young man, had brought his bride. Four years of quiet happiness passed by, then the messenger who visits the homes of rich and poor alike came to the cottage, and called away the kind husband, the loving father.

Ben was a baby then, a year old, and became the joy and delight of his widowed mother's heart.

The widow was not left wholly unprovided for. Her husband had saved a little money, and had bought the cottage in which they lived.

Mrs. Owen commenced again her former business of dressmaking, and earned sufficient to keep her child and herself in comparative comfort.

When Ben was six years of age, his mother became the wife of a man named Bell, the night-watchman at the Print Works.

Those who knew Bell best, knew how utterly unsuited he was in every way to Mary Owen, and with true northern frankness did not hesitate to tell her so; they reminded her that he was not a godly man, and that he was considered selfish and miserly.

Mrs. Owen listened quietly to these objections; as to being selfish, she said, well, all men grew more or less selfish who always lived alone, and who had only their own comfort to study.

As to being miserly, she granted John Bell took great care of his money, still it was better he should do that than squander it at the public-house as so many did.

And as to his not being a religious man, well, he did not drink, nor swear, nor gamble, nor quarrel with his neighbours; and when once they were married she knew she should be able to persuade him to attend Church with her; she would win him away from his love of gold, and teach him to "set his affections on things above."

"Tha' art makin' a mistake, Mary Owen," said old James Wynnatt, one of the oldest inhabitants of the village, "tha' art goin' to be onequally yoked, an there's never no good comes o' that: yon chap's ways are not thy ways; if I'd twenty darters John Bell should na' ha' only one o' them, that he should na'."

"Mary's made up her moind, oim thinkin', an' hoo'll noan listen to thee, James," said the good man's wife, "hoo'll do her own."

She "did her own;" that is to say, she refused to listen to her friends, and had her own way.

After her second marriage she still lived on in her old home. Her friends surmised, and rightly too, that the days of her widowhood, sad though they were, had yet been brighter and happier than those which followed.

But whatever disappointments and troubles befell Mary, she never complained of them, she kept her own counsel.

She had her boy, her fair-haired darling, she could not be utterly miserable so long as he was spared to her.

And she worked away more industriously than ever at her business, for, though John Bell earned good wages, and had few personal expenses, yet he only gave his wife a few shillings weekly for house-keeping.

So Mary had to supplement the small sum from her own earnings, and she also put by some money weekly for a special purpose.

The kind, loving mother wanted to keep her only child at home, and at school, longer than was customary in Ashleigh, and then apprentice him to some business.

She had her own hopes and ambitions, this quiet-looking woman, who rose early, and sat up late, and kept her home so scrupulously clean and tidy, and who was never heard to murmur or repine.

Mary Bell not only hoped, and planned, but she

sought help where alone true help is to be found ; by exercise of faith in a crucified Redeemer she sought and found forgiveness for her sins, and rejoiced in the love of God.

And, as the mother Hannah took her child to the Temple, and "lent him to the Lord," so Mary took her boy in faith and prayer to the Saviour ; and He who said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not," heard and answered the mother's prayers, and before Mary passed away from earth she had the happiness of knowing that her child, young as he was, was a true follower of Christ.

Ben was nine years old when he lost his mother ; how keenly he felt her death he alone knew.

It was sudden, and unexpected. For some weeks Mary had not been well, but she was one who would never complain about any ailment until compelled to do so ; she put down some work one day intending to finish it the next, but ere the sun set on the following day she had reached the city where "there is no more pain, neither sorrow, nor sighing."

Some said John Bell did not feel his wife's death at all. He certainly felt it, in so far as it affected his own personal comfort ; but if he had ever had any real, true affection for her he would have shown more regard to her wishes than he did, when he entered her boy at ten years of age as a half-timer at the Works.

Ben knew his mother's wishes, and pleaded earnestly with his stepfather to let him go to school at least another year or two.

"Tha' wilt go to th' school half the day until tha' art fourteen," replied John Bell, "what more dost tha' want? Dost tha' want to be one o' th' gentry, or a larned man same as th' parson? Tha' dost try to mince thee words foine same as he does!"

"I should like something different from yon Works," replied Ben; and, almost unintentionally, he gave utterance to the longings of his heart, "I should like when I'm a man to be a missionary."

"Tha' would loike to be a missioner? That comes o' church goin', an' meetin' goin', and Bible readin'; now look here, young Ben, oi'll ha' no more o' such loike nonsense; let them go to furrin' parts as 'ave got no carakter to get work in their own country, an honest man does na' need to leave his own land."

"But missionaries go to do good."

"Let em bide whom oi say, an' as for thee, tha' wilt go to th' Works, an' earn thysen a carakter same as oi did."

So that question was settled.

Ben offered no further opposition to his father's wishes, and John Bell rejoiced that he had, as he considered so easily, and so effectually, settled the question of the boy's future life.

Had he known the thoughts and plans passing through the young mind; had he heard the earnest prayers the boy offered, that if it were the Lord's will he might one day realize his heart's desire, John Bell might not have felt so elated. He had his own schemes

with regard to the future, and for the present the wages the boy earned weekly purchased his food and clothing.

For the food was plain, and poor as to quality, and as to quantity, Ben had not the amount of nourishment a growing child required ; often he rose from the table at meal times only half satisfied, yet unwilling to ask for more.

Sometimes he would look longingly at the loaf on the table, and John Bell, seeing the look, would cut him another piece of bread, and tell him at the same time that if he himself ate as greedily as Ben did they would both soon be " in th' Union."

The poor boy, who was not greedy, but was painfully sensitive, would make some stammering apology, and resolve to eat less for the future.

Then, Ben's clothing certainly could not have been very costly, a common suit for week days, and a better one for Sundays, and these of the cheapest and plainest material.

And those who knew how neatly and carefully the boy had been dressed during his mother's lifetime, made remarks about his present appearance which were anything but complimentary to John Bell.

But Bell had decidedly too good an opinion of himself to trouble greatly about the opinion of others.

He visited no one, and no one visited him ; a more unsociable man could scarcely be found.

He allowed Ben to go to church, though he boasted

of the fact that he had never been there himself since the day of his wife's funeral.

Sometimes he would give Ben permission to read to him, and on these occasions would either sit in dogged silence, or give utterance to sneers and contemptuous remarks. He was a man of one idea, of one fixed purpose, he meant to save and to make money, he was determined to die a rich man.

Other men as poor as he had made fortunes for themselves: why should not he succeed as they had done? To this end he worked, and pinched, and saved, and each year the sum in the savings bank became larger, and the man's life and sympathies grew narrower, and his heart became harder.

He did not hesitate, in order to add to his gains, to take advantage of the widow, the poor, and the fatherless. In his case "the love of money" was indeed "the root of all evil."





CHAPTER III.

AN EVENING VISIT.

BEN found his father standing at the door when he reached his home after the long afternoon he had spent at school.

“A minute longer an’ oi should ha’ been off,” said John Bell. “Tha’ hast been kept in, oi hear; it’s not for me to say if tha’ desarved it or not, but th’ Government says we are boun’ to u^hhold th’ skoomesters, so happen oi owt to thrash thee, but as ’tis th’ first offence oi dunnot want to be too hard on thee, tha’ wilt ha’ to go bowt thee tea, an’ think on as it does na happen again, lad.”

“Shall I bring your supper?” asked Ben.

“Ay, tha’ con bring it at noine o’clock, it’s wrapped up in yon hankercher, an’ thine is on a plate in th’ cupboard; come, Jess, we mun go.”

Jess, the watchman’s dog, looked up wistfully in Ben’s pale face, and followed her master slowly, and apparently unwilling: the dog obeyed her master, but she *loved* the boy.

John Bell was not one who valued the affection of man or beast, or else he might have felt jealous of the preference Jess invariably showed for his stepson.

"It's better walkin' now nor it were this afternoon," muttered Bell; "what a graidely foo' yon skoomester mun be if he conna tackle sich a lad as Ben, he's ower quiet to gi' onybody mich trouble."

Ben closed the garden gate and entered the cottage, hung up his well-worn cap, put his books on the table, and sat down on a low rocking-chair. The room was clean and tidy, there had been a small fire lighted to boil the water for John Bell's tea, but it had been allowed to go out directly after, and the tiny kettle stood on the hob filled with cold water.

"I'm not so very hungry," said Ben, as if trying to convince himself, "but I am thirsty;" and taking a cup from the shelf he filled it with water and drank it eagerly. Then he washed his hands and face and sat down to learn his lessons. He did his best to fix his attention on his books, but he was sick and faint for want of food.

He opened the cupboard door and looked at the plate upon which his father had placed his supper.

A hard crust of bread, and a very small piece of cheese, about two mouthfuls altogether for a hungry boy.

"If I eat it now I shall be hungry again before I go to bed," said Ben thoughtfully, as he left the food untouched and sat down again. His tired eyes wandered round the room as if in search of some beloved object.

There was the chair near the window, his mother's favourite seat, and the table she used for her work; the book-shelves in the corner containing her modest library, her Bible, and "The Pilgrim's Progress," "Foxe's Book of Martyrs," and two or three hymn-books. The boy's thoughts went back to the time, the never-to-be-forgotten time, when he had his mother ever with him as his constant friend. He heard the gentle tones of her voice again as she read to him from the precious Book the sweet story of old, he saw her pleading with his stern stepfather to grant him some childish pleasure, or to forgive some childish offence; again he wandered with her through the fields and lanes, and filled his hands with daisies for her to weave into chains for him.

Again he sat by her side near the bright fire, when the snow lay white on the ground, and the bright-eyed robins came up boldly to the window-sill for the crumbs his mother never forgot to place there.

Once more he knelt at her knee, and offered up the prayers she had taught him, and heard her gentle whisper, "God bless you, my boy," the mother's hand again pushed back the curly locks from the boy's fair brow, he was clasped tightly in her arms, and felt her loving kisses on his face.

"Mother, mother," he cried, "oh, tell me that you will never leave me again."

"Ben, Ben," exclaimed a child's voice, "dunnot carry on so, I'm feart, I am." Ben opened his eyes,

and saw the little schoolfellow on whose account he had been punished.

"Why, Jimmy," he exclaimed, "how long have you been here, how is it I did na' hear you?"

"I opened th' door an' comed in," replied Jimmy, "an' then I seed as tha' wert asleep, an' I waited a bit thinkin' tha' would waken up, but when tha' called out 'Mother, mother,' I were feart, I were, so I shrieked out a bit: see I've brought thee some cakes an' a tin can full o' tea. I told mother tha' had been kept in all along o' me, an' she said as she were sure tha' would ha' to go bowt thee tea, so when I knowed thy father were safe in th' Works I comed along, an' I ha' na' spilled a drop, no that I ha' na'," said the little fellow proudly.

"Your mother is real kind to think o' me," said Ben, as he poured the tea out into a cup.

"Nay, it's thee as is kind," exclaimed the child. "Mother said there were nor a lad in th' whole school as would ha' done as tha' did to-day. How is it tha' art different like from th' rest o' them, Ben?"

"I dunno as I'm so different," replied Ben, who was quietly enjoying the tea and cakes. "I try to say my words same as Mr. Deane an' Mr. Mervyn, but I'm noan a graidely talker for all that."

"It's not just the talkin', tha' dost na' fight nor swear nor knock th' little uns about same as th' other big uns do."

"No, I dunnot," said Ben, "because th' Bible tells

me I mun think of Christ, an' try to follow th' example He left us, an' tha' knows how kind an' gentle He was."

"Ay, it says in th' hymn-book, 'Gentle Jesus, meek an' mild.' Ben," added the child, looking timidly around, "art na' tha' feart to bide here alone at neet?"

"Feart! Nay, Jimmy, why should I be? I am as safe here alone as in a room full o' people. Father goes away at six an' I take him his supper at nine, then I come back an' go to bed, an' never see him again until six in th' mornin'!"

"Does he sleep most o' th' day?" asked Jimmy, wonderingly.

"He sleeps in the forenoon mostly, an' sometimes he goes out a bit before tea for a walk."

"He went out this arternoon, mother seed him go up th' street just before t' rain came; how it did come down, Ben, an' th' thunder an' th' lightnin'. Oh! I did wish as I'd never throwed yon apple. I meant it to hit Charlie Wills, I did, he'd been teasin' me all th' arternoon, an' I thowt I'd give him a real stinger on th' side o' his head, an' then I were real feart arter when I thowt I'd ha' to be kept in all alone; it were mean o' me to let Mr. Deane keep thee in instead though, that it were."

"I think tha' should tell Mr. Deane th' truth about it, not for my sake," said Ben, gently, "but because it's right an' pleasing to God when we tell th' truth an' tha' does na' need to be feart o' Mr. Deane, he's as kind as he can be."

"Ay, he is," said Jimmy, "how long has he been here now, Ben?"

"Three months."

"I'll tell him in th' mornin' I will."

"Tha' had better tell him now."

"What, to-neet, Ben?"

"Why not?"

"It would be troublin' him."

"Not so, Mr. Deane would na' think it a trouble he's been noan so well to-day, an' happen he'd sleep all th' better for knowin' a little lad had found courage to tell him th' truth."

"Wilt tha' come wi' me?" asked Jimmy.

"Ay, I'll come, we'd best go reet off at once."

The little hand Jimmy placed in Ben's friendly grasp trembled.

"Come along," said Ben, cheerily, "haven't I told thee tha' dost na' need to fear?"

"Tha' wilt knock at th' door an' ax for him," whispered Jimmy.

"Ay, sure I will," replied his friend.

Mr. Deane himself opened the door in answer to Ben's gentle knock.

There stood the two boys, Ben pale and tired, Jimmy trembling and tearful. The schoolmaster looked at them inquiringly.

"What is the matter with Jimmy," he said, "has any one hurt him?"

"Tell him," sobbed the child, clinging more closely to Ben, "I conna."

"Come in, boys," said Mr. Deane, leading the way to his pleasant sitting-room; "now tell me all about it," he added, as he closed the door.

"Jimmy wants to tell yo' as he throwed yon apple at school to-day, he wants to be a good boy, an' always speak th' truth," said Ben.

The ice was fairly broken now, and venturing to look up in Mr. Deane's kind face, Jimmy saw how needless his fears had been.

"I throwed it at Charlie Wills," said the child, whose tongue was loosened now, "he'd been teasin' me for ever so long, pullin' faces at me, an' callin' me cry-baby; an' I forgot all as yo' said about throwin' things in th' school-room, an' then I were so feart o' bein' kept in I dare na' tell yo', but Ben said I mun tell yo' the truth."

"Ben was right," said Mr. Deane, "never be afraid to speak the truth, Jimmy; whatever it may cost you, or however hard it may seem, still, never hide the truth; I am thankful to find I have a boy in my school who not only tries to be good and upright himself, but also endeavours to help and teach others."

Just then the door opened, and an old lady came quietly into the room. Such a beautiful old lady Ben thought as he looked at her.

She wore a black dress, not a silk, but of some soft, shiny material, and a small grey shawl upon her shoulders, and a white net cap with pale lavender ribbons.

She would always have worn black ribbons in her snow-white cap in memory of her precious dead, had she not yielded to the wishes of her only son, with whom she lived, who begged her not to dress herself entirely in mourning.

She spoke kindly to the boys, and smiled approvingly when her son told her briefly their errand.

"You will never be sorry for what you have done to-night," she said to Jimmy; then noticing Ben's wearied look she turned to him and said, "You ought to be in bed and asleep, my boy, you look so tired."

"I am tired," replied Ben, "but I must take my father's supper to him before I go to bed."

"Does your father work at night then?"

"He's watchman at the Works, ma'am, he's there from six at night to six in th' mornin'."

"Is your name Ben Owen?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ah! then I heard about you to-day at old James Wynnatt's. You see I am only beginning to know some of the people now, Ben, we have not been here long, and I have been very busy since we came. Good night, my boy, and remember, Ben, if I can help you at any time I will."

Thanking her for her kindness, the boys hurried away, Jimmy ready for any amount of conversation, Ben more quiet and thoughtful than ever.

"Wasn't they kind, Ben? An' isn't schoolmaster's mother like a pictur', an' flowers all o'er th' carpet, an

a big chimbley glass, an' a sight o' books, did'st tha' not see it all?"

"Yes, I saw it all," replied Ben, to whose imagination the room had seemed like a leaf out of a story-book; the pretty paper on the walls, the plain but tastefully arranged furniture, the white curtains looped with bows of coloured ribbon, the books and ornaments, the sweet summer flowers on the table and mantel-piece; all the nameless, little refinements; Ben was conscious of all these.

But to the motherless boy, the sweetest and the fairest of all had been the sight of Mrs. Deane, her motherly presence, and her kind words.

He recalled each glance of the loving eyes that had shed so many tears, but had not forgotten how to smile upon the young, and his heart beat faster when he remembered her promise of help.

How Mrs. Deane could befriend him he could not tell, he did not stop to question, but rejoiced at the remembrance of her promise.

He took his father's supper to the Works, and on his way home called to thank Jimmy's mother for the tea so kindly sent.

It was too dark to attempt to learn his lessons, and he had only a very small piece of candle ("enough to last him a week," his father had told him the day before), so he resolved to rise an hour earlier the next morning.

He ate his supper standing by the window, and

talking to a lark in a tiny cage. His father had brought the lark home a year ago, and had kept him a prisoner ever since.

Ben had begged and pleaded for the bird's freedom far more earnestly than he ever had done for any favour for himself, but John Bell only laughed at him.

So the boy, thwarted and defeated in his kind purposes, did all in his power to make the poor little songster's captivity less painful.

There were two cupboards in the room, in one some of the food was kept, in the other John Bell kept his lantern, and a few books and papers.

The second shelf in the cupboard was given to Ben.

Here he kept a slate, his old copy-books, and some of the toys his mother gave him when a child.

One of these toys was a small money-box in the shape of a house, and this Ben kept far back in the darkest corner of the cupboard.

Any one opening the door, and not stopping to look carefully, would never have noticed the little box, but Ben knew exactly where it was, and before he went to bed he climbed upon a chair and carefully reached it down. He emptied its contents on the table, and lighted the candle just for a minute while he counted the money.

"Only one more," he said, "then I shall ha' enough."

He put the money back again, and replaced the box, blew out the candle, and went to his lonely little bed, confiding himself first to the all-watchful care of Him "who neither slumbers nor sleeps."



CHAPTER IV.

SAM'L HORNBY'S GENERAL SHOP.

MAY I go as far as Eastfield to-night, father?" asked Ben the following afternoon.

"Ay, tha' con go," replied John Bell ungraciously, "it's a good three miles to Eastfield, an' three back agen makes six, there's nothin' like trampin' along country roads for wearin' out shoe leather, an' tha' wilt come whom as hungry as a hunter!"

"I shall na' want more supper than I have other nights," said Ben quietly.

"More supper! No, oi should think not, we should very soon be in th' Union if tha' started eatin' more nor tha' dost now."

And John Bell, having found as he thought sufficient cause for grumbling, grumbled away until it was time for him to start off to his work.

Eastfield was a queer little place, half village and half town, three miles away from Ashleigh.

There were no large Print Works there, but there were two cotton factories. There was not much intercourse between the two places.

The Eastfield people trooped over once a year to the annual fair, "th' wakes" at Ashleigh, and the Ashleigh people returned the compliment by attending "th' wakes" at Eastfield, and that was about all. Each of the two places had its own shops, and co-operative stores, therefore each was independent of the other as regarded business transactions.

Little Ben Owen had at this time a private business transaction pending at Eastfield.

There was a shop there known to all the boys in the neighbourhood, the like of which was certainly not to be found in Ben's native village.

The proprietor of this renowned establishment designated it modestly as "A General Shop," but, as he did not deal in soap, candles, treacle, or blacking, and various other useful articles which are always to be met with in a genuine *bond-fide* "General Shop," this designation might prove rather misleading.

A curious collection of useful and ornamental articles Samuel Hornby (or "Sam'l" as his neighbours called him) always kept in stock.

He had ironmongery of every description, from bedsteads, and bright, shining fenders and fireirons, to small, clasp-handled knives, and pennyworths of brass-headed nails and tin-tacks. Crockeryware of all kinds was also to be met with here; jugs and

mugs of all sizes hung on nails around the shop and warehouse adjoining, while dinner and tea services of various colours, and most remarkable patterns, were placed safely row above row on high shelves.

Here the hawker could replenish his stock of note paper and envelopes, thimbles, buttons, hooks and eyes, paltry jewellery and picture frames; and here, too, the thrifty housewife could buy needles by the hundred, and reels of cotton at so much per dozen, at a lower price than at the draper's.

No wonder Sam'l's shop was a popular institution, and Sam'l himself a successful and prosperous man.

Sharp and shrewd, he made but few mistakes in buying or selling.

He made a sad mistake once, though!

It was after a trip to Blackpool, where Sam'l and some of his friends went one Whit Monday, and where they enjoyed themselves greatly.

During the few hours they spent there they managed to have a drive, a donkey-ride to South Shore, a walk through the town, and along the promenade and pier; and in memory of their visit they were photographed by a travelling photographer.

Nor was this all.

They dined at an eating-house, and had tea and shrimps in a damp arbour, they had a bathe in the sea, and a row in a small boat, in which they struggled bravely through all the earlier stages of sea-sickness, and presented themselves afterwards with pale, sickly faces at a chemist's shop.

The chemist was a humane man, and seeing at once that in their present state of feeling any attempts at conversation would not be pleasant, he kindly refrained from asking them many questions, but quickly mixed some powders in soda water glasses, and handed them the mixture with an air of quiet sympathy.

"He were precious sharp a mixin' up yon fizzin' stuff," observed one of the party, as they left the shop.

"It's noan th' first toime as he's seen pasty-faced looking foaks," replied Sam'l, "he knows by this toime pretty well what to do; them little boats ought to be put down, they didn't ought to be allowed to upset people's feelin's in this way."

But Sam'l soon forgot his vexation, and sat down for a little rest. While resting he listened with delight to the music played by a German band, and to the songs sung by some negro minstrels. Sam'l seated himself about half-way between the two rival representatives of the musical world.

One of his friends suggested that they should go nearer the one or the other, in order that they might hear more distinctly, and more fully appreciate the merits of the performance.

"Tha' con go reet in th' front o' th' minsters, or reet in th' front o' th' Prussians, oi shall bide where oi am," replied Sam'l, "an' get all oi con for my money, oi dunno' come to Blackpool every day." So Sam'l remained where he was. It might have been more than slightly trying to a musical, or highly sensitive

ear, to hear "Die Wacht am Rhein" vainly trying to assert the supremacy over "Ring, Ring the Banjo;" but to Sam'l it was delightful; and with praiseworthy impartiality he bestowed the same remuneration on the grinning black-faced man in the coloured cotton suit and grey hat, who collected on behalf of the minstrels, as he did on the solemn-faced German who asked for a small donation for the band.

"Tha' does na' need to think as oi'm deceived by thee black face," he said to the minstrel, as he placed some coppers in his grey hat; "oi come fro' Eastfield i' Lancashire, an' we're noan sich foos there as not to know a nigger when we see one!"

"Tha' art th' genuine article," he said to the astonished German, "but oi'm feart tha' wilt do thysen some harm some day if tha' blows yon trumpet so hard."

It was soon after this memorable visit that Sam'l made a rash, and as it proved, an unfortunate speculation.

His quick, observant eyes had seen in the market at Blackpool, a number of pretty china cups bearing this inscription, "A present from Blackpool for a good boy."

The idea suggested itself to Sam'l's enterprising spirit why should he not have china mugs for sale similar to these, only with the name Eastfield substituted for Blackpool?

He wrote off at once to the Potteries to order fifty.

A reply came by return of post to say that an order could not be executed for a smaller number than a hundred and fifty.

"Then send a hundred an' fifty, an' look sharp about it," wrote back Sam'l.

In a wonderful short space of time the goods arrived.

Sam'l carefully unpacked the large crate; not one of the precious mugs was broken, nor, so far as he could tell, even cracked.

He rubbed and polished each one separately with a corner of his large apron (a very useful article was Sam'l's apron, it answered the purpose of teacloth, duster, and pocket-handkerchief, and occasionally did duty as a table-cloth), and then placed them in rows in his window.

He made room there for as many as he possibly could, even taking down a timepiece, a set of lustres, and some figures under glass shades which had been a source of wonder and admiration to the juveniles of Eastfield for many months.

"No fear that they'll sell," said Sam'l to himself as he looked at his window, "oi shall ha' to order more."

But he never did order any more, simply because he found himself unable to dispose of those he had. Whether it was because the boys at Eastfield (and there were plenty of them, of all ages and sizes) could nor truthfully be said to belong to the class for whom the mugs were intended; or whether the boys them-

selves showed a lamentable want of taste by persuading their parents to bestow upon them as rewards for good conduct, other gifts, such as balls, tops, knives, kites, etc., certain it is that the mugs remained on hand, greatly to Sam'l's annoyance.

The village schoolmistress bought nine, and gave them away to the most docile and diligent of her pupils.

"Have yo' no cups for good girls as well as good boys, Sam'l?" asked a motherly-looking woman one day when she was making several purchases at the shop.

"Nay, oi never gave th' lassies a thowt," replied Sam'l.

"Well, oi'm surprised," said the good woman, "tha' knows oi've three girls, an' oi would ha' bowt them each a gill-pot like yon, for they're real pretty."

"Then why no ha' them?" exclaimed Sam'l, "what does it matter if it says boy or girl? Th' tea ull taste all the same, an' little uns like yourn conna read, yo' know."

"Martha Ann can read a bit," said the mother, with a slightly injured air.

"They sell a sight o' cups like these at th' seaside," said Sam'l to another customer the same day.

"Oi know they do," replied the party addressed, "but Eastfield is na' th' seaside, an' children would na' set as mich store by them there mugs same as they would if they'd comed fro' Blackpool and Southport."

In vain Sam'l spoke about the beauty and utility of the mugs ; he invariably offered them for approval to any strangers passing through the village, who happened to find their way to his shop.

Perhaps they did not care to be troubled with such breakable articles as china cups, or they may not have admired Eastfield sufficiently to wish to carry away a memento of it ; anyhow they always declined the purchase.

In his anxiety to dispose of his large order, Sam'l even offered the unfortunate mugs at a little more than cost price, at so much per dozen, but all in vain. He sold about twenty of them, kept a few on a shelf in the shop, and packed the remainder away in his warehouse, "a livin' monument of my folly in imitatin' waterin' places," Sam'l would sometimes say.





CHAPTER V.

A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT.

IT was after seven o'clock when Ben reached East-field ; and Sam'l was busy in his shop.

Ben waited until several customers had been attended to, and then stated his business.

“ A cage tha' says,” said Sam'l, “ oi ha' a graidely lot o' cages, lad, what sort were it ? ”

“ A wicker cage,” replied Ben, “ a good sized un, yo' said it were two an' six but you would let me ha' it for two shillin' ! ”

“ Ay so oi did now oi think on't ; well dost tha' want to tak it wi' thee now ? ”

“ Nay, I ha' only gotten one an' eleven pence, but I thowt I'd come an' make sure that as th' cage were na' gone, I shall soon ha' another penny, an' then I'll come again, good night, an' thank yo'.”

“ Here, stop,” exclaimed Sam'l, “ hast gotten th' money wi' thee ? ”

“ No,” replied Ben.

"Tha should ha' browt it, oi would ha' letten thee ha' th' cage, an' ha' trusted to thee bringing me th' other penny, tha' looks honest."

"I am honest," replied the lad, "an' no fear but I'll come soon an' fetch th' cage away."

"I shall soon ha' it now," said Ben to himself as he walked homewards, "an' the lark will be a sight better off in yon than in th' little cage. I wish father would let it go free, it seems to long to fly away, an' beats itself against th' bars of th' cage till I'm sure it must be hurt sometimes; an' when it sings it seems to be beggin' an' prayin' for its liberty."

A year ago John Bell had greatly astonished Ben by telling him that he had resolved to give him a penny every other Saturday for pocket-money. Not a very large sum certainly, not half the amount other boys of Ben's age spent weekly in marbles and sweets, but small as it was it was a great surprise to Ben, who knew his father's love of money.

"A penny every other week, Ben, makes two an' tuppence a year," said his father, "think o' that, Ben; think o' all as can be done wi' two an' tuppence; why there's mony a mon i' Manchester ridin' i' his carriage as did na' ha' more nor two an' tuppence to start wi' i' life."

Ben spent the first three pennies he saved in purchasing some daisy roots, which he planted on his mother's grave.

He then began to save his money again, intending

to buy some more plants for the same purpose early in the spring.

But when the spring came, Ben had resolved to spend his mony on something else. "Mother loved th' birds," he said, "an' she would ha' grieved to see th' poor lark frettin' itself in its little cage, she'd be far better pleased if I spent th' money on th' poor bird."

That very week a boy passed the cottage, carrying in his hand a good-sized wicker cage.

"What might yo' give for that?" asked Ben.

"I gave one an' sixpence at Sam'l Hornby's o'er at Eastfield, but he has some a deal bigger for two shillin' an' two an' six, but this is big enough for a throstle."

"It's cruel to keep 'em," said Ben.

"To keep what," asked the lad, "th' cages?"

"No, th' birds."

"Not it, they're as well off in th' cages as flyin' all o'er the country."

"Happen yo' think as yo' would be as well off in th' prison as yo' are out," said Ben.

"Nay, oi dunnot."

"Well, th' cage is a prison for th' bird, an' what stone walls would be for thee th' bars of th' cage are for th' bird."

"They conna feel th' same as us."

"Conna they? I'm noan so sure o' that, there's a power o' things in th' world we know very little about, happen we'll be wiser some day, but I'm sure an'

certain for my own part as everything that has life can feel."

"Oi dunnot clem my bird," said the lad sullenly.

"They dunnot clem folks in th' prison, they give 'em their vittles reg'lar; but there's not many as likes goin' there for all that. It isn't enough for th' bird to ha' a bit o' seed to eat, an' a drop o' water to drink, it wants its nest an' th' sunshine, it wants to watch th' dew fall, an' see th' sunset, it wants to hear what th' winds are whisperin' about to th' trees, and see th' flowers grow. Ah! there's a sight o' things a bird must miss when he's shut up in a cage."

From that time Ben's decision was made.

The first two shillings he could save should be given for a better cage for the captive lark. For this purpose he saved his tiny hoard of pocket-money, and went over to Eastfield, and inspected Sam'l Hornby's assortment of cages.

Now he had only to wait until Saturday, when he would receive another penny, then he would have the sum required.

The time would soon be here now, only another day before Saturday.

On the Friday evening he took down from its hiding-place his little box, and opened it.

Alas for poor Ben!

What a bitter disappointment for the boy's tender, loving heart! The money was gone, the whole of it!

Poor disappointed Ben!

He stood by the table gazing absently at the empty box; he climbed upon a chair, and searched among the books, papers, and toys in the cupboard, all in vain.

No stray pennies had found their way out of the box, and hidden themselves elsewhere.

"Father has taken them," said Ben, "he might have told me first."

He closed the cupboard door, and sat down on the low rocking-chair on which his mother had sat and nursed him when he was a little child. He thought of his mother then, and a hard lump rose in his throat.

He laid his head upon the table, and remained perfectly still for a few minutes; then he rose, and with trembling hands took from the shelf his mother's Bible.

"She said it were always a comfort to her an' it has been to me. I'll read some of her favourite verses."

He turned to the twenty-third Psalm.

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

"No, I shall not want," he exclaimed, "The Lord will take care of me."

Then he read many of the precious promises written in the New Testament.

"There's one grander an' greater than any other, in Revelations," he said: then, having found the verse he sought, he read, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no

more out, and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is New Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and I will write upon him my new name."

Then he read the twenty-first verse of the same chapter, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne."

"To him that overcometh," repeated Ben, as he closed the Book; "that means there's a battle to fight, a victory to win; Lord Jesus, give me grace and strength to conquer, and oh, bless my father, for Christ's sake."

John Bell made no remark about the money when Ben took his supper to the Works that evening, but the next day he put a penny on the table.

"That's for thee," he said, "an' oi'm real pleased, Ben, to see as tha' does na' squander thee money same as some lads: oi put another penny to them as tha' had saved, an' oi've put it in th' Savings Bank in thy name."

"Thank yo'," replied Ben, "but I'd set my heart on buyin' a bigger cage for th' lark. I can get one for two shillin'."

"Th' bird's reet enough where it is," said his father impatiently; "tha' dost gotten sich fancies, Ben, oi never seed such a queer lad in my life."

No more pennies found their way into the little money-box in the cupboard.

Ben went to Mrs. Deane, and asked her if she could kindly take care of his pocket-money for him.

"There's plenty in th' village as would do that an' more for me if I axed 'em, but they might talk about it," said the boy.

"I understand," said Mrs. Deane, "I will take care of anything you bring me, Ben, but will not say a word about it."

Not even to this kind friend did Ben tell the story of his disappointment, he bore it patiently and uncomplainingly.

Only through the bright summer's days, when the lark seemed to droop and pine in its tiny cage, Ben would think of his two shillings in the Savings Bank, and turning to the bird would say, "I ha' na' th' power to set thee free, but tha' should ha' had a better home than that, if I could but ha' spent my money as I wished."

And Sam'l Hornby, in his shop at Eastfield, wondered what had become of the boy, who had seemed so wishful to purchase the wicker cage.





CHAPTER VI.

THE STRANGERS.

THE bright summer days were over, the leaves had changed their colours, and fallen from the trees, and were blown hither and thither by the cold autumnal winds.

The summer had been unusually hot, and it was foretold that the coming winter would be very severe.

Prudent housewives as they heard this looked over their stock of blankets, and winter clothing, and bought as many warm garments as they could afford, in order to be well prepared to meet the cold weather.

Anxious, careworn women, whose husbands spent the greater part of their earnings at the public-house, and who knew by past experience how much easier it is to meet the home wants in the summer than in the winter, sighed, as they thought of the cold days and the long dark nights, towards which they were hastening.

“Coals will be dear an’ food will be dear, it’s to be

hoped we'll be able to keep out of th' Union," said John Bell.

Ben had grown accustomed to his father's imaginary picture of their residence in "th' Union;" he had cried "wolf" so often that Ben was not to be easily frightened now.

He only wished that his father would buy him a warmer suit, and allow him to have a small fire in the evenings, for the nights were chilly, and Ben himself was far from well.

"If tha' art cold tha' con come to th' Works to me an' Jess, it's warm enough there," said John Bell, in answer to the boy's request.

But Ben did not care to be in the Works longer than he was obliged to be, so he made no further complaint about the cold.

When once December had fairly set in, his father would have a fire lighted each morning, and kept in the whole of the day; a poor, miserable apology for a fire certainly, still it would be better than none at all.

"What a bad cough tha' hast got, Ben," said old Mrs. Wynnatt, as the boy was passing her door one Saturday afternoon, "come in, lad, come in."

Ben went in, and took a seat near the large, bright fire.

"It looks comfortable here," he said.

"It is comfortable," said Mrs. Wynnatt, "we ha' a many mercies to be thankful for, Ben."

"That we ha'," said old James, from his seat in the

chimney-corner ; "there's somebody knockin' at th' door," he added, turning to his wife.

"Nay, it were but th' wind," she replied.

"Th' wind dunnot gi' double knocks at doors i' that way," said the old man.

"Perhaps it's father looking for me," said Ben, and he jumped up, and opened the door.

Two men stood outside, strangers to Ben two men in warm overcoats, and round felt hats.

Old James caught sight of them.

"Come in," he said, "come in out of th' rain."

"Thank you," said one of the strangers as they stepped inside the clean, warm kitchen, and wiped their feet upon the mat.

"Could you tell me where we could get lodgings?" asked the other stranger.

"Lodgings," exclaimed old James, "what, in th' village?"

"Yes," replied the stranger with a smile, "is my request a remarkable one?"

"No one takes a house or lodgings in th' village unless they're boun' to work here."

"We might be here a week or two," said the stranger carelessly, "we have some business matters to attend to in Manchester, and some friends we want to look up, but we do not wish to stay in Manchester, we are accustomed to the country."

"It's considered healthy here, is it not?" inquired the other stranger.

"Healthy ! ay, yes, it's healthy enough," replied old James.

"There's Mrs. Thorp's," said Mrs. Wynnatt, who was busy thinking about the lodgings, "she has two rooms she lets sometimes."

"We could manage with two rooms, though we should prefer three," said the younger of the two men. "Would you kindly tell us the way to Mrs. Thorp's, and we will make inquiries about her rooms ?"

"I will show you th' house," said Ben, putting on his cap.

"Ay, do, Ben, that's a good lad, an' then come back an' h' a cup o' tea with us," said Mrs. Wynnatt.

"Thank yo', if father does na' mind, I will."

The strangers followed Ben down the lane, and into the village street. It was a dull November day, a damp day of mist and drizzling rain, and the children seemed one and all to have decided to spend their weekly holiday indoors.

Some of the fathers of the families had sauntered into the public-houses, and some were, to use their own expression, "cleanin' themselves," that is to say, having a wash, and changing their working clothes for their second-best suits, in which, after tea was over, they would go out shopping with their wives, or go and smoke a pipe and have a chat with a neighbour. Some were nursing the baby, or giving Tommy or Bobby "a ride to Banbury Cross," while the mothers got the four o'clock tea ready, for they kept early hours on Saturdays at Ashleigh.

So it happened that Ben and his two companions made their way to Mrs. Thorp's cottage without attracting much attention.

Joe Brown, the dirtiest and most neglected boy in the village, saw them, and rushed home to tell his mother that "Ben Owen were walkin' along o' some stranger chaps."

Martha Brown, who had the most unruly children, the most miserable home, and certainly the longest tongue, in the parish, ran out into the middle of the road, and was just in time to see the strangers' coat-tails disappear into Mrs. Thorp's house.

"They've gone to Mrs. Thorp's," exclaimed Martha, "happen they're relations o' hers; what were they loike, Joe?"

"Oi dunno'," replied Joe, moodily, "an' oi dunnot care, nother!"

Mrs. Thorp's husband was the gardener at "Ashleigh House," the residence of Mr. Ashford, the owner of the Print Works.

Mr. Ashford intended to build a cottage for James Thorp in a field behind his house, but until this was done James was to live rent free in one of the houses in the village street.

James' wife was "noan Lancashire," the Ashleigh people were wont to say. She came from the south of England, and was a quiet, retiring woman.

Ben Owen's mother had been her only intimate friend in the place; to every one else she was "Mrs. Thorp," civil and obliging, but nothing more.

She had only two children, Jimmy, Ben's little friend, and a little girl. Her family being so small, and her husband away at his work all the day, she liked to let two of her rooms when she could.

But "apartments" were not greatly in request at Ashleigh; sometimes a respectable workman would occupy Mrs. Thorp's rooms while waiting to obtain a suitable house, but for the greater part of the year they were unoccupied.

This was the case now; and after hearing the reasons the strangers gave for their stay in the village, she showed them her parlour and spare bed-room, made all the necessary arrangements about terms, and, leaving them upstairs unpacking the carpet bags they had with them, she went down to the kitchen, where she had left Ben talking to Jimmy.

"They are going to stay for a week at least, Ben," said Mrs. Thorp; "don't hurry away, stay and have tea with us, my husband will be home directly. He said only yesterday that he never got sight of you now."

Jimmy and his sister Susy added their entreaties to their mother's invitation, but Ben thanked them, and told them he had promised to go back to old James Wynnatt's, if his father would allow him.

John Bell readily gave the desired permission, and Ben walked quickly back to the old man's cottage. The tea was ready on a small, round table, drawn close to the fire. The bread was home-made, and so were the currant-cakes, and the hot muffins.

Ben thought of tea-time at home, the stale, hard

crusts with their thin scraping of butter, and the poor, weak mixture which was supposed to be tea.

The boy often wondered how his father bore the many privations of their daily life.

If he gave Ben only the plainest and the poorest fare, the boy was just enough to acknowledge that he did not purchase luxuries for himself.

To get and to save was the end and aim of the money-lover's existence.

"An' so th' strangers have gone to Mrs. Thorp's," said old James, as he handed Ben his tea.

"Yes, they've taken th' rooms for a week at least," replied Ben; "they axed a sight o' questions as we went there."

"Did they now?"

"Yes, they axed if Mr. Ashford were at home now, or away. They said some one had told 'em as th' Print Works belonged to a Mr. Ashford, who were away for a month or two at once sometimes, on account of his health, an' they axed me my name, an' where I lived, an' where my father worked?"

"Did'st tha' hear their names?"

"Grant; they said they were cousins."

"They're uncommonly loike one another, oi should ha' took 'em for brothers," said Mrs. Wynnatt.

"I showed 'em th' church," said Ben, "an' told 'em what time th' services began."

"That were reet, lad," said old James approvingly; "if they're God-fearing men they'll find their way to His house to worship Him."



CHAPTER VII.

MR. HENRY ASHFORD'S REFUSAL.

SUNDAY was the happiest day in the week to Ben: he always went twice to the Sunday-school, and twice to church, and was one of the most attentive listeners to Mr. Mervyn's faithful sermons.

Mrs. Deane would often look across from her seat by her son's side, to the corner where the boy sat, and, as she noticed the eagerness with which he listened to the truths of the Gospel, she thought of the hopes and plans he had confided to her.

Ben had told her that he longed above everything else in the world to try to teach others about Jesus.

"If I conna be made learned enough to go abroad an' teach th' heathen about th' Saviour, still I might happen get learning enough to work in some o' th' streets an' lanes o' th' cities. Some left their fishermen's nets, an' some th' plough, an' some their business, to work for th' Great Master. I dunnot think He'd

despise me because I'm but a poor lad," Ben had said to her.

"No, my boy," was Mrs. Deane's reply, "the Saviour would never despise your willing services; if it be His will that you should work for Him, a way will be opened. Remember always that the Lord knows best."

The boy's longings and desires for future usefulness, did not so engross his mind as to cause him to neglect the opportunities to work for Christ that day by day presented themselves.

He was ever ready to show kindness to any one whom he could in any way befriend; he bore patiently the taunts and jeers of his schoolfellows and work-mates; and refrained from murmuring at the many hardships of his lot in life.

The two strangers who had taken Mrs. Thorp's apartments did not make their appearance at church on the Sunday.

Ben saw them walking about the village in the afternoon, and pointed them out to his father.

"Oi wonder who they can be," said John Bell; "does Mester Deane know owt about 'em, Ben?"

"Mr. Deane!" exclaimed the boy, "no, how should he know anything?"

"Nay, oi conna tell, lad, oi thowt happen he moight, he's lookin' a deal better is Mester Deane since he comed here."

"He is better," replied Ben, "he is stronger than he was."

This was really the case; Mr. Deane's health had certainly improved, he said himself that he felt stronger than he had done for years.

His work in the school was not so hard a task as it had been at first, the children were not so rebellious. Some of them felt perhaps that it was useless fighting against a master who was quietly resolved to be obeyed, but the majority of them had learned to love Mr. Deane, and did not find it difficult to obey him.

The first week in November passed away, and then the second, and the two strangers still stayed on at Mrs. Thorp's.

Sometimes they went away for a day or two, and then returned.

They stopped Ben one morning on his way home to breakfast, and asked him if he thought they could obtain an order to see the Works before they left the village.

"There's no orders given as I knows on," replied the boy: "no one is allowed to go through th' Works unless they're friends o' Mr. Ashford's."

"Is Mr. Ashford still away?" asked the younger of the two men.

"Yes, he's still away. Mr. Henry Ashford is at home, he comes to th' Works every day."

"Mr. Henry Ashford is the son?"

"Yes, th' eldest son. Mr. Lionel does na' live here, he's in th' army."

"Then I think we must ask Mr. Henry Ashford's

permission," and bidding Ben good morning the two men went on their way.

That same morning a note was brought to Mr. Henry Ashford as he sat at his desk in his father's office.

He read it carefully through, and smiled.

"No, no, Mr. Robert Grant," he said, "we cannot tell what your business may be, and, therefore, certainly cannot write out an order for you and your cousin to view the Print Works. My father's word is law here, and if we broke our rules for one we might break them for twenty strangers." And, taking a sheet of note-paper from his desk, Mr. Henry replied briefly, "The Works are not allowed to be viewed by strangers; this is our rule." The answer was given to one of the clerks, who carried it to the outer office, where the elder of the two strangers was standing.

"This reply is from Mr. Henry Ashford himself I presume?" said Mr. Robert Grant.

"From Mr. Henry himself," replied the clerk.

"Thank you," said Mr. Grant, "my cousin and I would like to have seen the Works before leaving the neighbourhood, but it does not signify."

Mr. Robert Grant and his cousin spent the remainder of the day away from the village, and when they returned in the evening they told Mrs. Thorp they thought they should remain a week or two longer if convenient to her.

Mrs. Thorpe raised no objections; they paid for their rooms regularly, and did not keep late hours, or disturb her in any way.

They were respectably dressed, and appeared to have plenty of money.

"They don't belong to th' gentry, an' they don't belong to th' workin' class," said John Bell, "but they're civil-spoken men for all that; if they'd axed me oi could ha' telled them they'd noan get leave to go o'er th' Works, th' master's more particular now nor ever he were sin' he's gotten th' new machinery in; besides, there's things in th' colour shop an dyehouse it would na' do for every one to see; there's trade secrets here same as elsewhere; there's nobbut one or two as ha' worked there as knows all th' processes."

"Oi know as mich as onybody," said old James Wynnatt, who was listening to Bell, "boy an' man, I've worked there all my life."

"Ay, no doubt tha' knows as mich as onybody," replied John Bell, "take care tha' dost na' tell thee wife; there's nowt can be kept quiet when once a woman knows it."

"Dost think so," said old James; "th' Good Book tells me it were nor a woman as betrayed th' Lord an' th' Saviour into th' hands of the chief priests and captains for thirty pieces o' silver, an' it were a woman as browt th' alabaster box o' ointment, an' poured it on th' Saviour's head; an' it were th' women as followed Him from Galilee ministering unto Him; an' it were th' women as were at th' sepulchre early in th' mornin'. Nay, nay, John Bell, they're noan so bad, tha' dost na' need to think or speak lightly o' th' women foaks."



CHAPTER VIII.

A PAINFUL DISCOVERY.

NOVEMBER was drawing to a close, and Ben's cough grew worse each day.

Mrs. Deane sent him some medicine, and gave him some flannel vests, and warm stockings.

And John Bell, miser though he was, took pity on the boy so far as to allow a fire to be lighted and kept in each evening.

One afternoon Mr. Deane asked Ben to go to his house for a book he wanted.

The nearest way from the school was across a field at the end of the playground.

A gate at the other side of the field opened into the lane where the schoolmaster lived.

It was a quiet spot, only a few houses had been built there.

There were fine tall trees on either side of the road, and on summer evenings "Low Lane," as it was called, was a favourite walk for the children and lovers from the village.

There were no children, and no lovers in the lane on this November afternoon, but to his surprise, just as he reached the gate, Ben saw his father, Mr. Robert Grant, and his cousin, walking slowly along the lane.

The boy did not wish to speak to any of the party just then, he wanted to hurry on to Mr. Deane's house, so he drew back from the gate, and stood near the wall that separated the field from the road.

On came the three men talking eagerly. Ben thought at first they were quarrelling, and hoped that they would not decide to return home the very way that he had come, or look over the stone wall and discover him standing there.

On they came, nearer and nearer. Now the boy could tell from the tones of their voices that they were not quarrelling as he had feared at first, but arguing, or discussing some question very earnestly.

"Twenty pounds," he heard Mr. Robert Grant say, "it's really too high a figure, my good man."

"Please yoursen," was John Bell's sullen reply, "it's not my business."

"Don't speak so loud," said the younger of the two Grants cautiously.

Ben drew a long breath and looked round.

Yes, they had gone now; he waited a few moments, then opened the gate and hastened away up the lane.

Mrs. Deane gave him the book he had been sent for.

"Did you come across the field?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," replied the boy.

"Don't go back that way, then," said his kind friend, "the grass is so wet."

So Ben returned by the lane. He saw nothing, however, of his father or the two Grants, and John Bell made no reference at tea-time to his afternoon's walk, and Ben asked no questions.

Only as he sat alone by the fire, at night, he wondered what business transactions his father could possibly have with Mrs. Thorp's lodgers.

What was the money for?

Had the two strangers got into debt, and borrowed, or wished to borrow, money from John Bell, who in return required the sum of twenty pounds as interest?

No, that was too wild and silly a notion, and Ben laughed at himself for having entertained it for a moment.

Besides, how should they know, even supposing them to be in pecuniary difficulties, that the night-watchman at the Print Works had saved money?

The next afternoon, when school was over, Jimmy Thorp showed Ben a sixpence.

"It's moine," said the little fellow, "th' lodgers gived it me, they've gone away to-day for good."

"Have they really?" asked Ben.

"Yes, they shook hands with mother, an' said good-bye quite perlite," said Jimmy, who was evidently greatly impressed.

"Mother says she wishes oi'd learn to speak same as they do," he continued, "she's goin' to give me a shillin' when I don't say toime an' moine."

"But time and mine instead," said Ben, who knew Mrs. Thorp's dislike to the Lancashire dialect.

"Ben," said his father, as he started off to the Works that evening, "oi'll noan tak' th' dog to-neet."

"Not take Jess!" exclaimed Ben.

"Not tak' Jess," repeated Bell, "th' dog's moine, oi con tak' it or leave it if oi choose."

"Of course," said Ben, wondering in his own mind what new whim or caprice this could be.

Even Jess looked puzzled, but was very well pleased to remain at home with Ben.

"He'd ha' thowt it queer or else oi would ha' told him not to ha' browt my supper," said Bell to himself as he walked along.

The person referred to was Ben, and why on this occasion his father should trouble about what he thought, seeing that at other times he cared nothing for his opinion, Bell only knew.

Ben had finished learning his lessons, and was reading a book Mrs. Deane had lent him, when he heard a knock at the door.

"Who's comin' now?" he said.

He opened the door, and to his surprise saw his little friend Jimmy, almost breathless from haste and excitement, and with tears running down his rosy cheeks.

"What is the matter?" asked Ben.

"Oh, please, Ben," panted the child, "mother says wilt tha' go to Leyton for th' doctor?"

"The doctor? Who is ill?"

"Susy, she's real bad, an' father's gone off to-day, he will na' be back before th' mornin'; it could na' ha' happened worse, mother says, th' lodgers gone an' all, they'd ha' fetched the doctor."

"I'll fetch him," said Ben, getting ready at once; "who said he'd gone to Leyton?"

"Th' housekeeper," replied Jimmy, "oi went to his house an' she said he'd gone to Leyton Lodge to dine an' spend th' evenin'; them were her words; they dunnot ha' their dinner afore seven, tha' knows."

"No," said Ben, "but th' doctor will na' be long comin' when once I've seed him. Run back, Jimmy, an' tell mother not to fret, we'll soon ha' Susy well again, please God."

The nearest way to Leyton was past Mr. Deane's house.

With Jess by his side Ben hurried on; his cough was very troublesome sometimes; now and then he was obliged to stop for a few moments, in order to get his breath.

It was a rough, windy night, and it was bad walking along the roads after the heavy rains.

"Th' doctor will ha' his trap an' drive me back wi' him," said Ben; "two miles will na' seem far when one's ridin'."

Scarcely had the thought passed through the boy's mind when he heard the sound of wheels.

"Happen some one else ha' sent for th' doctor," he said, and stood still to see the conveyance pass.

"I'll shout out if it's him, an' tell him about Susy," he thought.

But the conveyance did not pass the spot where the boy stood, holding Jess tightly by the collar, for the dog was apt to be rather too demonstrative sometimes to strangers.

Instead of passing, the conveyance drew up at the side of the road, and two men got down from it.

"I have paid your master for the trap, and here is a shilling for yourself," said a voice which Ben recognized instantly as Mr. Robert Grant's.

"Thank yo', Sir," replied the driver, "it's a good step to the village, oi'll drive yo' on wi' pleasure."

"No, than' you," said Mr. Robert Grant, "we prefer to walk after our long drive."

"There," Ben heard him say as the conveyance drove back towards Leyton again, "I hope you are satisfied, my dear brother; our appointment with our mutual friend is at half-past twelve, and here we are at nine o'clock in these delightful lanes."

"Better too soon than too late," replied the younger Grant, "if we were five minutes late, Bell would think we had turned faint-hearted. Let us walk back a few yards and then turn into the Eastfield road."

Poor Ben! There he stood, still holding Jess by the collar, fearing he knew not what if the two men should find him there and know that he had overheard their words,—words spoken so rapidly and quietly Ben wondered that he had overheard them.

But the boy's sense of hearing was wonderfully quick, and he had recognized Grant's voice at once.

It was too dark to see many yards ahead, so Ben waited until he thought he had allowed the two men sufficient time to get into the Eastfield road: then he hastened on.

He reached Leyton Lodge and asked for Dr. Eliot.

When the doctor heard Ben's errand, he prepared to return with him immediately.

A kind, good, and clever man was Dr. Eliot, respected by all who knew him.

Seated by his side in the dog-cart, Ben thought anxiously about the discovery he had made of the return of the two Grants.

What was their business with his father?

What appointment had they made with him or he with them.

Only one answer to these questions presented itself to the boy's agitated mind.

His father must have consented to admit them into the Works on condition that they paid him a sum of money.

His father must have been tempted, bribed, to commit an act so base, so treacherous, that Ben's pale face flushed crimson at the mere thought of it.

Should he be in time, could he do anything, to prevent their accomplishing their purpose?

"What a bad cough you have, Ben," said the doctor,

"you ought not to be out these wet, cold nights; I shall have you laid up next."

"I hope not, Sir," replied Ben, but he shivered as he spoke, and Dr. Eliot bade him wrap his rug tightly round him.

It was as much from nervous agitation as from cold that the boy was trembling, but the doctor did not know this.

"Get away home and to bed, my lad," he said, as they stopped at Mrs. Thorp's door, "and keep out of the night air until your cough is better."





CHAPTER IX.

IN THE WORKS.

WITH trembling hands Ben unlocked the cottage door, and not waiting even to strike a light, he groped his way to the cupboard and took out his father's supper.

Jess stood at the gate, prepared to follow him to the Works and home again as faithfully as she had followed him to and from Leyton.

"Nay, nay, Jess," said the boy, "tha' must bide here," and he sent the good dog back into the cottage, and locked the door.

Jess whined piteously, but Ben went on his way as though he heard it not.

"I mun stop there," he said to himself, "I mun stop there, but *how?*"

He rang a bell at a small side gate near the large ones leading into the yard.

He heard his father open a door, and walk across the yard.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"It's Ben, father," said the lad.

Bell unfastened a bolt on the small gate by which he admitted himself, the large ones were not unlocked before morning for the workpeople.

The small gate closed itself with a spring, and could not be opened from the outside without a key.

Ben noticed his father did not stop to fasten the bolt after admitting him, evidently he expected him to return home very soon.

Lately Ben had always taken his father's supper to the Works, and Bell found the boy's short visits a pleasant relief to the monotony of his duties.

In his own hard, stern way, the watchman cared more for Ben than he ever had done for any one else.

"Tha' art late," he said, as they entered a little room on the first floor where he sat to eat his supper, "where hast tha' been?"

"I'm very late, I know," replied Ben. "Jimmy Thorp came to ask me to fetch th' doctor fro' Leyton Lodge, little Susy were very ill an' James Thorp away; I went as fast as ever I could, an' th' doctor drove me back, but I'm very late for all that."

"It's strikin' ten now," said Bell, with his mouth full of bread and cheese, "tha' mun be off sharp. How yon door bangs in one o' th' rooms, oi mun stop that."

Taking up his lantern the watchman slowly climbed the stairs.

Ben was too much accustomed to his father's unceremonious conduct to offer any remonstrance at being left alone in the dark. Besides, could anything have served his purpose better ?

He had been wondering how he could contrive to remain all night in the Works ; now an opportunity had presented itself.

In a moment he rushed from the room and went as quickly as he could down a long passage.

He had no difficulty in finding his way about in the dark, he knew the Works so well.

There was a door at the end of the passage down which he hastened, which opened in a room where large baskets, or " skips " as they are called, were kept. As quick as thought Ben slipped behind a row of the skips, and crouched down on the floor.

" So Ben's gone," said John Bell, when he returned to the little room, and his half-finished supper ; " well it isna th' first toime as he's found his way out in th' dark, an' it were toime he were gone, oi'll fasten th' bolt now," and taking his lantern in his hand, Bell crossed the yard, and bolted the gate.

Ben heard his footsteps in the yard, and heard him return and lock the door.

What should he do now ?

Go back to his father, and beg, implore, and entreat him to allow no stranger's foot to cross the threshold of the door ?

And what if his father laughed him to scorn ? Or, indignant at the accusation, refused to listen to him ?

What if, after all, his father were innocent of all this; what if it were but some dreadful dream, some vision of his disordered imagination? Ben was no coward, but he shrank from the thought of accusing his father of acting in so mean and despicable a manner.

Better that he should stay quietly where he was, and when daylight drew near he would seek his father, and tell him why he had remained in the Works all night, to save him if he could from that which was sinful.

He would tell him, too, how ill he felt, and ask his permission to rest for a day or two.

Poor Ben, his whole frame trembled, and his brain seemed to be in a perfect whirl.

"Lord help me," he said.

He tried to clothe his thoughts and longings in other words, but words failed him.

"Lord help me," he murmured again.

The large clock struck eleven, and soon afterwards Ben heard his father coming down the passage that led to the room where he was.

He crouched down behind the skips, and remained still and quiet on the floor. He heard his father's heavy footstep as he crossed the room, and, fearful lest his cough should come on, and betray his hiding-place, he took from his pocket a lozenge he had had given him, and as quietly as possible put it in his mouth. In doing this, however, his arm rubbed against one of the skips, making a slight noise.

"Rats," said John Bell, "oi mun ax for some more poison for 'em."

With his lantern in one hand, and his watchman's staff in the other, he walked through the room and out of the other door.

Then the thought entered Ben's mind, what if his father should lock the doors at the end of the passages leading to the long-room where he was hiding!

He groped his way to the nearest door, the one by which his father had entered, and went cautiously along the passage.

No, there was no door locked there. Ben could, if he wished, return to the little room in which Bell took his supper.

A fit of coughing came on, long and violent, and Ben crept back to the long-room and skips again.

The watchman away up in the rooms where the silent machinery stood never heard the sound.

He only heard the splash of the rain against the windows, and the wind rising and moaning around the building.

The clock struck twelve, and Ben, who was listening to every sound, heard his father descend the stairs, and unlock the door by which he went in and out.

"He's goin' to th' engine-house now," said Ben, for his father had told him the times at which he went to attend to the fires.

Then Ben left the long-room, and the skips, and went nearer to the door, and listened.

The clock struck the quarter, and his father had not returned.

Then the half-hour, and Ben heard the gate opened and closed again, and footsteps coming quietly and cautiously towards the door.

Could Ben reach the door first, and bolt and bar them out?

The thought came too late, for as the boy rushed onwards he heard the three men quietly enter, and the door fastened once more.

But a moment's reflection showed him that had he carried out his purpose Bell would still have found his way in; for he had all the keys with him, and, rather than have been baffled and thwarted in his purpose at the very outset, he would have smashed one of the lower windows, and obtained admittance in that way.

"Has't browt money?" Ben heard his father ask, as the three men entered the little room.

"Seeing is believing," said Robert Grant, taking out his pocket-book.

"Four fivers," said Bell; "now to work, oi'll see yo' dunnot leave wi'out settlin' up wi' me."

"We'll do nothing shabby, depend upon it," said the other Grant (Will, his brother called him); "we might have to ask a favour again some time."

"Come on, then," said Bell, "let's waste no more toime, yo' mun be clear out o' here in two hours. What is to be first, th' new machines?"

"Yes, we may as well have a look at those," said

Mr. Robert Grant, taking in his hand the lantern Bell had lighted for him; my brother will not want one," he added, "he has his note-book to attend to."

The three men went up the stairs, the two with the lanterns walking first, Will Grant with his pencil and note-book in his hand the last.

Ben's mind was fully made up now.

"Lord help me," he prayed again.

Then, only waiting until he heard his father close the door of the room he and the two men had entered, he went quietly up the stairs. He opened the door and stood face to face with the three men. The two Grants looked at each other but said not a word; but the watchman put down his lantern, and seized the trembling boy in his strong grasp.

The broad-shouldered man, with his heavy brow, and dark, angry eyes, was not a pleasant sight to look upon just then.

"Art tha' alone?" cried Bell.

"Ay, alone," said Ben, faintly.

"Dost tha' know why they're here?" asked the father, pointing towards the two men.

"I know all," said Ben. "Father," he gasped, "they have bribed you, tempted you, but it is not too late, you have not touched their money, only let 'em go their way an' I'll not breathe to any one."

"Tha' wilt breathe no word as it is," exclaimed Bell, almost mad with passion, "swear tha' wilt na' say one word o' what tha' hast seen an' heard, or oi'll put it out o' thee power to speak; th' dead tell no tales."

"Nay, nay, gently," interposed Mr. Robert Grant, "tell the boy he shall have a good present out of the money you receive if he promises to hold his tongue. We are doing no harm here, my boy," he added.

Ben heard not a word he said, he felt his strength failing him fast, his face was as white as death, and his eyes sought his father's face.

His brain was dizzy ; he seemed to hear his father's threat repeated again and again, and he found himself wondering *how* he would kill him ! With one blow ? Or would he throw him into the deep pond—"the lodge," as it was called—at the other side of the Works ?

There would be a hue and cry made for him, and if his body were found there the people would only conclude that he had fallen in by accident ; others had met with death in the treacherous lodge, and why not Ben ?

"Lord help me," he said again.

John Bell relaxed his hold of the boy, and stood watching him, no sign of pity or forbearance on his stern, hard face ; all the man's evil passions were roused within him.

"Swear !" he exclaimed.

Ben bowed his head a moment, and his pale lips moved as if in prayer.

Then he looked up, and Bell saw the unutterable horror expressed in the boy's white face, but he saw no yielding fear.

"Wilt tha' swear ?" he said again.

"I conna swear," said Ben; "it's only reet as th' master should know as there's traitors here; if I live I'll tell him, unless yo' will bid 'em go."

Not pausing to listen to the remonstrances of the two Grants, mad with anger, blinded with passion, John Bell raised his hand and struck at the boy.

Ben saw his hand raised, and moved aside to ward off the blow if possible, but his strength was almost gone; he reeled and fell backwards on the floor, hitting his head as he did so against an iron wheel.

"Come," whispered Will Grant, hoarsely. "Come Robert, the lad may be dead."

Self-preservation was a very powerful instinct in Robert Grant's mind, and without pausing even to look at Ben, he took up his lantern and walked towards the door.

John Bell followed the two men down the stairs, and out into the cold night air; mechanically he unlocked the door, and unfastened the gate.

Both the men spoke to him, but he never noticed or answered their remarks, or raised any objections to their sudden departure.

He bolted the gate, and locked the door again, climbed the stairs, and entered the room, where lay on the floor, white and still, the boy who had chosen rather to suffer death than to commit sin.



CHAPTER X.

NEW YEAR'S EVE.

AT first John Bell believed that Ben was dead; he thought that the shock and fright had killed him. But as he bent down over the quiet form, he heard him breathing, very faintly, very feebly, it is true, but still life had not left him.

Bell took off his coat, and made a pillow of it for the boy's head.

As he did so, he saw how in falling he had given his head a severe blow.

There was a deep cut above the left eye, a broad gash made by a sharp point projecting from the wheel against which Ben had knocked himself.

Bell shuddered as he tied his handkerchief over the wound.

Then he got some water, and bathed the boy's face and hands.

Still there was no sign of any return to consciousness, and all Bell's fears came back again.

"Oi mun get him to th' cottage an' to bed," he said at last.

There was a man who lived near the Works who could undertake the watchman's duties, if he would.

To his house Bell hastened, and succeeded in arousing him at once.

"Wilt tha' go to th' Works for me," he said. "Ben is ill, an' oi mun go whom."

"Ben ill! Ah, oi'll go," replied the man; "leave th' keys here."

Back to the Works Bell went with rapid steps. He wrapped his coat round the still unconscious boy.

Even then, unnerved and excited as he was, the man's habitual caution did not forsake him.

He stooped down, and by the light of his lantern looked carefully on the floor where the boy had fallen. No, there were no tell-tale marks there, and Bell breathed more freely again.

He carried the boy in his arms to the cottage where Martin, who had promised to be his substitute, lived.

He put the keys on the step and knocked at the door.

"Th' keys are on th' step," he shouted, and was gone before Martin, who was slow in speech and slow at work, could reply.

The cottage was soon reached, the key taken from Ben's pocket, and the door unlocked.

Jess made a piteous moan as Bell placed the boy on the old-fashioned chintz-covered sofa that stood in the front room.

Then Bell went for the doctor ; he told him Ben had had a fall and hurt his head.

"Poor lad," said Dr. Eliot, "he is not in a state of health to stand any severe shock. I'll come at once, Bell ; I was just going to bed ; I only left Mrs. Thorp's half-an-hour ago."

Bell watched by the poor lad's side until daybreak and then went to Mr. Deane.

"They're two chaps as 'ave come into some property, an' they've some reason or other fur wantin' to know all th' ins an' outs o' calico-printin' ; they were nettled at Mr. Henry's refusin' to let 'em go o'er th' Works, an' they made a bet wi' some o' their friends i' Manchester as they would go i' spite o' him ; oi've heard Ben read how Judas sold his Master fur thirty pieces o' silver ; oi sold moine fur four bank-notes ! Yo' con tell on me, Mr. Deane ; but as yo' are a mon an' a Christian, wait while Ben is better, oi should go mad if oi were took from him just now.

"I shall not betray your confidence," said Mr. Deane ; "rest assured you shall remain with Ben."

"And your mother, will she come an' see him ? He thinks a sight on her."

"Yes, she will come ; I had better tell her how Ben got the blow."

"Ay, tell her, tell her, hoo's not one to chatter," replied Bell, forgetting in his anxiety for Ben his distrust of a woman's power to keep a secret.

It was a nasty blow the doctor said, when he came

the second time to see the boy, but there was not much fear but that he would recover from its effects ; only, and the doctor looked very grave now, the boy seemed to be so very weak, only the night before he had been pained to hear what a bad cough he had.

“ If it’s nobbut weakness hinders him getting better, there’s a sight o’ things money can buy to mak’ foaks strong,” exclaimed Bell ; “ see here, doctor, Ben con ha’ onything as ud do him good, oi’ve money saved an’ oi’ll spend it all to get him well.”

The first week in December passed, then the second, and still Ben lay in a state of unconsciousness. Now and then he seemed to rally, and Bell’s hopes rose high, only to die away again as the boy relapsed into unconsciousness.

There was no delirium ; he never called for his dead mother, or imagined she was with him, or spoke of the past ; he simply lay on his little bed, “ slippin’ away fro’ life,” old Mrs. Wynnatt said.

The third week came, and then Ben slowly returned to consciousness again. He opened his eyes one afternoon, and saw his father standing at the foot of the bed intently watching him.

“ Father,” he said, “ how is Susy ?”

“ Susy !” repeated Bell ; “ who is Susy ?”

“ Mrs. Thorp’s little girl, I fetched th’ doctor, yo’ know,” gasped Ben.

“ Oh ! Susy Thorp, she ails nothin’, it wére a fit, she were cuttin’ a tooth, th’ doctor soon had her round

again. Ben," continued Bell, going nearer to the boy, "Ben, dost tha' moind now all as 'appened, them two scamps as bribed me, an' how tha' camed, an' oi threatened oi'd kill thee an' oi hit out at thee an' tha' fell an' knocked thysen?"

"I knocked mysen, did I?" said the boy, wonderingly. "Ay, I know all th' rest."

"Con yo' ever forgive me, Ben?"

"Forgive yo'?"

And the boy looked up into the man's worn, haggard face; he took his hand and pressed it to his lips. "It's all reet between thee an' me, father, say no more about that."

For several days after Ben seemed really better, but the doctor only shook his head when Bell declared the lad would soon be well again. The patient himself appeared to think that he was slowly but surely recovering.

"When I'm better," he said, on Christmas Day to Mrs. Deane, who was sitting beside him, "father is goin' to church with me."

The doctor was in the room, and heard the remark. As he shook hands with Mrs. Deane, he said, "Try if you can gently tell the poor boy that there is little or no hope of his recovery. Should he grow suddenly worse he may be alarmed."

"Ben," said the old lady, quietly, when they were alone together, "would you grieve very much if you knew you would never be better here on earth again?"

The boy looked earnestly at her. "There's father," he said; "all I want to do for him, and th' work I want to do for th' dear Lord?"

"The Lord will take care of your father, Ben, and of the work too, He will send forth other labourers if it please Him to call you home to Himself."

"I'm *young to die*," said the boy; "an' oh! if I'd had health an' strength I'd ha' loved to work for Christ; but if it's His will for me to go, then I'll noan murmur."

He seemed better all that week, but the next week he grew worse again, weaker and weaker day by day.

John Bell told Mr. Ashford of the boy's critical state, and that the second doctor called in only confirmed Dr. Eliot's opinion that the boy might pass away any moment.

"He has no stamina, no constitution to fall back upon," said the medical men."

"And you want to be released from your duties in order to be at home with him," said Mr. Ashford kindly; "stay with him by all means, I will find a substitute for your work."

All that medical skill could suggest was done for Ben, but no human means could save the boy's young life.

The last day of the old year came, and still Ben lingered.

"I thought I should see th' old year out," he said. "Father, I mun be th' first to wish yo' a happy New

Year; I'll wish it yo' now, lest I should be asleep when it comes."

"There'll be no happy years for me, Ben, if tha' goes," sobbed Bell.

"There'll be *peace*," said the boy. "Th' peace th' world conna give nor take away. Father, mind, yo' promised me yo' would seek it."

"Oi will, lad, oi will," replied Bell.

"What shall I read to you, Ben?" asked Mrs. Deane that evening.

"Read in the Revelation," said Ben, "about him that overcometh."

"Th' reward's too great for me, Lord," they heard him whisper as his friend closed the book; a crown, an' a seat on th' throne, an' a new name! I've done nothin' for Thee, Lord!"

Then he opened his eyes, and looked round the room.

Mr. Deane and his mother, John Bell, and old Mrs. Wynatt, were all there. "How good you've all been," said Ben; "do I hear th' bells ringin'?"

No, the bells were not ringing, they told him.

"Is this dyin'?" he asked. "*I'm noan feart.*"

There was another pause; then he said, "Mother, are yo' callin' me? I'm comin' now, mother!"

Then all was still and silent for a time.

Then the church bells rang out, welcoming the new year.

But the boy in the little cottage heard them not.

He had gone to the city where time is not counted by weeks and months and years.

“For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.”





CHAPTER XI.

AT LIBERTY.

JOHAN BELL kept faithfully the promises he had made to Ben. He attended the services of the church, and read the Bible daily; he prayed earnestly, and yet failed for a time to find the peace of which Ben had spoken.

He was sitting alone in the cottage one afternoon, thinking of the boy who had found this peace, and who had been "faithful even unto death."

He thought of the lad's patience, his gentleness and forbearance, and he thought of his own coldness and harshness.

The man's wrong-doing had been great, but his repentance was true and sincere. "Oi'd gi' all th' money oi ha' in th' bank, an' all oi ha' invested, oi'd gi' it gladly, freely, only to ha' Ben here again," he exclaimed.

Then he thought of the home the boy had gone to,

the bright and happy home the Saviour had prepared for him.

"He said he were '*noan feart*' to go, that were because he loved th' Saviour," said Bell. "Why did he love Him so?"

He took up Ben's little Bible, and turned to the story of the Cross. He read it over and over again.

"Oi see it now," he said at last. "Christ died for us because He loved us, an' all he axes us to do is to love Him an' try to do His will."

The next day he found his way to Mr. Deane.

"Oi comed to tell yo' oi believe in Him," he said.

"Believe in whom?" asked Mr. Deane.

"Him as died on th' cross for th' sins of th' whole world, for *my* sins; oi believe He's forgiven me, though oi can *never forgive mysen*."

The next day he went to the parsonage and asked for "th' parson."

"What can I do for you, my friend?" asked Mr. Mervyn, kindly.

"Thank yo', Sir," replied Bell, "yo' 'ave done what yo' could for me. There's a bit o' money here," he added, placing a small canvas bag on the table, "an' yo' can gi' it to th' poor, or to th' missionaries, or what yo' think best. Him as is gone would ha' been a missionary if he'd lived; *he wor one while he did live*; he missioned to me same as no one else in th' world ever did. Oi could ha' made his life a deal brighter, Sir, if oi had na' loved my money so; but I conna

undo th' past. Yo' shall ha' some more money fro me another day, Sir;" and before Mr. Mervyn could express his happiness at the change in the man's feelings, or his thanks for the unexpected gift of ten pounds, he had gone.

The spring came with all its promises of new life and beauty.

One bright, warm afternoon, John Bell closed his cottage door, and went, as he often did, into the quiet churchyard.

In his hand he held a wicker cage containing the lark.

He had remembered Ben's wish, and had bought a larger cage for the bird.

He walked slowly through the churchyard until he came to the boy's grave.

What a quiet, peaceful spot it was!

The bright sunlight passed in and out through the boughs of the trees, and a bird on a hawthorn tree sang clearly and sweetly, but yet softly, as though it feared to disturb the sleeper's rest.

"Ben, little Ben," said the tall, strong man, as he knelt beside the grave where pink and white daisies and sweet-scented violets grew, "Ben, oi've found th' peace th' telled me on, an' it were all thy doing, Ben."

And the strong man's tears fell fast.

Then, rising, he opened the door of the wicker cage.

"Him as is gone," he said to the lark, "loved for all things livin' to be free an' happy, he could na' abide to

keep birds and sich loike caged up, he grieved to see thee frettin' in thy cage, but oi could na' turn thee out in th' cold winter. But it's spring toime now, an' tha' con build thysen a nest," he added, as he took the lark tenderly out of the cage.

The bird fluttered gently over the surface of the ground, then paused as if to rest.

"It's lame or hurt it's wing," exclaimed Bell.

But it was not lamed or hurt, it was only overjoyed to find itself free once more.

It rose again, higher, higher it soared this time.

Then it came back again, but only for a moment.

It flew suddenly from the ground ; higher, higher it rose, and soared up to, and beyond, the trees, to where the white clouds drifted over the sunny sky ; and, as it rose higher, and yet higher, it filled the air with song.



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